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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0642
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0160
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 4753
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2233

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 002495

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DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/30/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [KBTS](#) [RU](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SOUTH OSSETIA INCIDENTS: LESS FATAL, BUT
BOLD

REF: A. TBILISI 2176

[1](#)B. [HTTP://WWW.EUMM.EU/EN/PRESS_AND_PUBLIC_INFORM ATIO-
N/PRESS_RELEASES/668/](http://WWW.EUMM.EU/EN/PRESS_AND_PUBLIC_INFORM_ATION/PRESS_RELEASES/668/)

[1](#)C. TBILISI 2492

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Although the area around South Ossetia has not seen any conflict-related fatalities since November 17, several recent incidents have caused injuries and shown a brazen attitude by the South Ossetian or Russian perpetrators. Georgian Interior Ministry forces have been the targets of a December 5 guided missile, a December 10 roadside bomb, a December 18 machine-gun attack, and a December 27 shooting; the roadside bomb was placed near Pkhvenisi, 8 kilometers outside the administrative boundary. International monitors have also been targeted; an EUMM patrol was threatened at gunpoint on December 6, and an OSCE vehicle was attacked on December 10. Meanwhile both Perevi and Akhagori remain problematic. Reports of random shooting are already increasing as the New Year approaches, causing fears of further escalation; drunkenness could cause problems; and the likely departure of the OSCE military monitors on February 18 could cause further destabilization. An Interior Ministry official downplayed concerns in the immediate term, saying the cold weather will keep people indoors and make it harder to shoot them, but he also suggested that Russia wants to keep the situation along the boundary tense in order to maintain pressure on the Georgian government. End summary.

INTERIOR MINISTRY STILL UNDER FIRE

[1](#)2. (C) Since the November 17 killing of two and wounding of three Georgian Interior Ministry officials (ref A), post is unaware of any fatalities on either side of the South Ossetian administrative boundary. Attacks have continued, however, with most originating inside South Ossetia and targeting Georgian Interior Ministry officials, usually within a short distance of the boundary. On December 5, the OSCE reported a guided missile struck a stable next to the police station in Mereti, causing significant damage to the structure and injuring a cow; the EUMM reported the missile originated in Disevi, inside South Ossetia. The OSCE reported an anti-tank missile landed in the town of Atotsi on December 21, doing no significant damage. On December 18 the OSCE reported a police officer was slightly wounded in a machine-gun attack in Khurvaleti; another police officer was slightly wounded by gunfire near Ditsi on December 27. Director of the Interior Ministry Analytical Department Shota Utiashvili told EmbOff the bullet came from a "vintorez," which he described as a \$60,000 specialized sniper rifle that Ossetians generally would not have, but that Russian special forces are often provided.

13. (C) On December 10, however, the EUMM and OSCE reported the rear of an Interior Ministry vehicle was damaged by an improvised explosive device on the road near a bridge in Pkhvenisi, eight kilometers from the administrative boundary; one officer was slightly wounded. The fact that the rear of the vehicle was damaged, not the front, indicated to both monitoring missions that the device did not detonate upon impact, but was remotely detonated, either by wire or radio. Although the perpetrators remain unknown, if they originated in South Ossetia, they had to travel well beyond the boundary in South Ossetia, they had to travel well beyond the boundary in order to set the device and then detonate it. This incident could reflect a new willingness on the part of the attackers to reach farther outside of South Ossetia into areas that had generally been considered secure.

14. (C) On December 20, the Interior Ministry told the EUMM that it would begin deploying COBRA armored vehicles in the area around South Ossetia, and both the EUMM and OSCE (and UNOMIG outside Abkhazia) have since observed them in the field. The EUMM publicly criticized the deployment, suggesting that the use of such vehicles although not a violation of the cease-fire agreement, would not enhance security on the ground. The EUMM statement further noted that, although ten Georgian police officers have been killed since the end of the war, none of those incidents would have been prevented by armored vehicles (ref B). In private, the EUMM expressed its concern that the Georgian use of the COBRAs endangers its own EUMM monitors, because some -- the Polish contingent in the Gori field office and the Italian contingent in the Zugdidi field office -- use similar vehicles. It also noted that following more regular standard

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operating procedures would have done more to protect the Georgians, and furthermore suggested that the use of armored vehicles might actually encourage attackers to shoot. (Post comment: The EUMM public arguments are not convincing to the Georgians and many diplomats, because the EUMM monitors themselves always use armored vehicles. The real concern is what they expressed to us privately: that their own monitors not be confused with Georgian forces and attacked. One could argue that the use of the COBRAs, which have a more military appearance than traditional police vehicles, increases the perception of militarization along the boundary (although some EUMM vehicles have a similar appearance), but it is hard to find fault with the Georgian side taking a step to protect its personnel -- the same step taken by all three international monitoring missions. End comment.)

MONITORS ALSO IN THE CROSSHAIRS

15. (SBU) On December 6, the EUMM reported drunk Ossetian militia threatened an EUMM patrol with a pistol in Didi Gromi. An OSCE monitor told EmbOff that an EUMM patrol was forced out of its vehicle and held for over an hour at gunpoint; this may have been the same December 6 incident. On December 10, outside the South Ossetian boundary near Zemo Khviti, an unidentified individual in partial uniform suddenly appeared before an OSCE patrol from behind some bushes, drew a weapon, and fired into the air. As the vehicle began withdrawing, a second individual, also in partial uniform, appeared from behind some bushes and fired directly at the vehicle, hitting it several times. The vehicle was armored, and no one was injured. This was the first such direct attack on any monitors since the war.

16. (C) The December 10 attackers appeared to the OSCE to be laying in wait for them. Although the immediate circumstances are somewhat inconclusive -- the attackers may have been surprised by the patrol -- an OSCE monitor suggested to EmbOff it was most likely premeditated, offering the following explanation. On December 1, an OSCE patrol witnessed an individual stop a white Lada across the administrative boundary from Zemo Khviti (the same location

as the December 10 attack), remove an automatic weapon from the trunk, and fire a single shot toward the village (no one was injured). The OSCE patrol then revealed itself, and the individual quickly drove off. One week later, in the same location, an Ossetian soldier warned another OSCE monitor to stay away from the area. Two days later, on December 10, an OSCE patrol returned to the spot to show it had not been intimidated -- and was attacked. The OSCE monitor interpreted the attack as retaliation for what was perceived to be interference in the Ossetian militia's military activities.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

17. (C) The OSCE has already received increasing reports of random shooting along the boundary, probably in connection with upcoming New Year's celebrations. As the administrative boundary is so poorly defined and so interlocking, and because so many villages on either side of the boundary abut each other, any shooting -- even of a celebratory nature -- in an already tense atmosphere could easily escalate into something more malicious. Holiday drunkenness -- frequently cited by the Georgian government, the EUMM and the OSCE as a problem among the Russians and Ossetians anyway -- could make a problem among the Russians and Ossetians anyway -- could make the situation even more unstable. Analytical Department Director Utiashvili did not expect any major difficulties in the coming weeks, suggesting that the cold weather will keep people indoors, making them more difficult targets. He acknowledged, however, that alcohol could lead to misunderstandings and therefore escalations.

COMMENT: BEWARE WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY TOO

18. (C) On February 18, the OSCE's military monitoring mission is scheduled to close, and post expects it will take some time for the EUMM to pick up the slack (ref C). Utiashvili also downplayed this concern, suggesting that the OSCE's lack of access to South Ossetia makes the mission unable to have much impact now anyway. He did add, however, that Russia probably wants to keep the situation along both the South Ossetian and Abkhaz boundaries tense, in order to maintain pressure on the Georgian government. The apparently premeditated retaliation against the OSCE for interference in potentially attacks suggests to post that the unidentified troublemakers roaming the administrative boundary see the

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OSCE as a hindrance to their activities. End comment.
TEFFT